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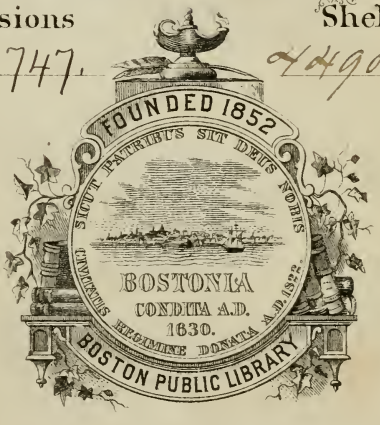

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MARY MAGDALENE

And Other Poems

BY

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MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY OF THE ARCADIA, AND OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF SAINT CECILIA, OF ROME

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TO MY HUSBAND

I AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBE THIS POEM,

SUGGESTED BY HIS STATUE OF

MARY MAGDALENE AT

THE TOMB.

Palazzo della Congregazione,
243 Via Nazionale, Rome.

NOTE.

AMONG the ancient Greeks and Romans, when the celestial divinities were invoked, the suppliant stood with uplifted arms; in addressing the terrestrial deities, the arms were extended forward; and in imploring the infernal powers, the arms were directed downward.

MARY MAGDALENE.

Part First.

I.

'Twas night : upon Jerusalem the moon
Poured her still splendors down ; the purple sky,
Embossed with silver stars, majestic spread
Its quivering canopy to meet the dim
And distant circle of th' horizon's bound
In shadowy hills, and gleaming, half-seen plains,
The plains that wait, the hills that watch around
The rock-clasped pomp of great Jerusalem.
Fair rose the city from its mighty belt
Of dark and rough-hewn walls : its palaces
Crowded in sculptured pride, its synagogues,
Its storied colonnades, its myriad roofs,
Its terraced gardens fringed with ancient trees,

Shone glittering in the rain of lucent rays ;
And in the midst the marvel of the land,
The giant Golden Temple, upward soared,
Far flashing through the stillness of the night.

II.

Silent the city slept, but on the verge
Of the sheer precipice, stood glimmering white,
'Mid slender cypresses and towering palms,
A stately marble pile, whose pillared porch
And wide-oped windows, all ablaze with light,
Proclaimed the revelry that reigned within.
It was the home of Mary Magdalene,
The beautiful and the unholy one,
The Magdalene, that sinful city's boast,
The Magdalene, that sacred city's shame.

III.

On this soft summer night the high-born crowd
Which formed her customed court was gathered there :
The thick-browed Jews with cold and cruel glance,
And full, red lips, within whose deep curves lurked

Sarcastic lines of brooding discontent,
Hardening their sensuousness with underchord
Of bitter, biting hate ; their ample robes
Of purple and fine linen folded close
Around their sinewy frames ; unheeding all
Their ancient rules, pressed thither. Pliant Greeks,
Vivid and mobile, panther-like in grace,
As serpents wily and as falcons keen,
Their chiselled features flashing with the play
Of their astute discourse, enamelled o'er
With apt quotation from their country's bards,
Inwrought with sophistries, dank poison dew
Of unbelief dark tingeing every thought,
Clustered within those flower-scented halls.
In gay-fringed robes draped with well-studied art,
Their golden circlets gleaming on their arms,
Their dainty locks perfumed with Orient spice,
They delicately smiled, and subtly sneered
In the sweet accents of their native tongue.
The young patricians of imperial Rome,
Their haughty heads set on unbending necks,
Their very courtesy tainted with command,

Their slowly moving eyes and level lids,
Their swollen nostrils, and their flaccid cheeks
Telling the tale of drear satiety;
Their massive shoulders and their brawny chests
Showing athwart the costly broidered folds
That wrapt them in their pomp of sullen pride,
Sought in that chosen dwelling of delight
To turn their memories from the feasts of Rome.

IV.

These, her companions and her courtiers, lay
Within her sumptuous banquet room, their forms
Outstretched on downy couches round the board
Heaped high with luscious viands brought from far,
From east and west, from north and glowing south,
To tempt the pampered appetites they fed.
Bright glancing wines in precious vases poured
Their rich aromas on the tepid air,
While round the hall huge scented torches burned,
Their tall flames flickering in the fitful breeze
That swayed above the city's hush of sleep.
The smooth mosaic pavement was o'erstrewn

With scattered flowers, jessamine and rose,
And music stole forth ever and anon,
Filling the pauses of the jocund talk
With cadence mirthful or with murmurous plaint.

V.

High throned upon her carven ivory couch
Upheld by golden lions, silent lay
The Magdalene, the queen of that choice court,
And listened, listless, to the shifting flow
Of sparkling jest and wit-embroidered speech ;
But when the singers' voices thrilled the air,
She raised her wistful lids and gazed afar
As though her soul were stirring in its sleep,
Nor knew the life that lapped her day by day,
But solitary dreamed in realms apart.
Her soft, white limbs revealed by silvery gauze
Through which their lustrous tints like moonlight shone,
The waves of rippling gold that crowned her small
And languid-leaning head, her violet eyes
That dewy swam beneath their deep-fringed lids,
Now careless resting on her gathered guests,

Now bent upon the flower-scattered floor;
The rose-blush of her childlike, dimpled mouth,
Its corners drooping with a faint distaste;
The witching rhythm of harmonious grace
Controlling every youthful curve and line;
On these enticing charms the torches shed
Their bright illumination; — but not these
Alone their radiance showed. Around that sweet
And melting beauty hovered in the air
A strange, peculiar spell, — a magic art
Some of her courtiers deemed it, — which had might
To set the stamp of innocence upon
That lovely and that too belovèd face.
No brazen stare of conscious guilt confessed
The inner aching of a shame-pierced soul,
No glance of florid blandishment proclaimed
The loss of all that woman holds most dear,
No flippant laughter parted those young lips
To echo heartless through the sumptuous hall,
No word of plague-struck meaning dropped its taint
Companioning the jests around her board;
Unlike all others of her sinful caste,

As a white rose 'mid flaunting tulips seen,
The far-famed Magdalene lay silent there,
Her every beauty beaming fair revealed,
Yet haloed by her own unconsciousness.

VI.

Now as she listless dreamed, her ear was caught
By sudden harshness in the tones of one
Who seldom spoke, a swarthy, gray-haired Jew.
A shadowed frown disturbed the level line
Of her sweet brows, as the discordant voice
Came rasping on the warm and scented air.
"A beggarly impostor, nothing more;
One of the spawn of ignorance and craft
That swarms upon us in these latter days,
Leading the stupid multitude astray:
Soon to be smitten by the very hands
That now applaud, to be reviled and cursed
By the capricious voices that to-day
Proclaim him as the great Messiah come.
Most fortunate the cunning villain is
If these dear friends and followers, undeceived,

Turn not to rend him quivering, limb from limb;
Forestalling the quick day when Roman hands
Shall mete out Roman justice to his crime."
He seized a crystal cup and drained it dry,
Then set it down so roughly that the tall
And twisted stem was shivered in his grasp.

VII.

A youthful Roman knight, a stranger there,
Who was in act of raising to his lips
A rubied nectarine from the broad vase
Of fretted gold that stood beside his arm,
Turned his calm look upon the hoary Jew,
And quiet answered, "I have yet to learn
What crime may lurk in teachings such as those
Myself have heard from him thou thus contemn'st.
Last week as I was travelling hither, near
The hostel where I tarried for the night,
This cunning villain, as thou call'st him, stood
And taught the wondering multitude his faith.
As in the hostel not a soul was left,

But all had crowded thither, I too went
To see what novel folly moved them thus.
I stood and listened. Cavil as thou wilt,
He spoke as never mortal spoke before!"

VIII.

A burst of laughter loud its greeting gave
To the young Roman's words. The elder knight
Who had companioned there his kinsman, bent
His mocking gaze upon him, and besought
He would not stint such unaccustomed fare,
But generously share with all the guests
The wondrous teachings of this latest fool.
With haughty glance the young patrician scanned
The eager, jeering faces round the board,
And slow replied, "I doubt me if the words
This peasant spoke, could find an entrance here.
He told of truth and purity and good:
He taught God is a spirit, and as such
Must worshipped be in spirit, and in life
Of noble deeds, of love from man to man;
Counting no cost too great to win that pearl

Of price, the spirit's holiness." He paused
And looked around upon the silent throng.

IX.

His circling glance fell on the Magdalene.
Half raised upon her rounded arm she leaned,
Bent forward in a line of wavy grace ;
Her golden head inclined to catch his words,
Her eyes attentive fixed upon his face,
With parted lips she listened from her couch.
Sudden before that loveliness all thought
Of the poor peasant faded from the mind
Of the young Roman. "How divinely fair
The woman is ! No marvel that her fame
Has passed the far gates of imperial Rome.
How exquisite her posture ! What delight
To lavish kisses on those deep-fringed lids ! "
But as he speechless gazed, her eyes looked forth
Mutely imploring, and her low voice came
With mild entreaty, "Probus, is there more ? "
And with the instant habit of command
Learned from his Stoic tutor, pressing down

The quick desires high-foaming in his heart,
Obedient to her will, he spoke again.
"The people thronged about him as he taught,
And listened stirless ; while the slow tears ran
Down many a rugged cheek, and women sobbed
When he, uplifting both his arms, thus cried :
'Oh ye, my weary ones, behold your rest !
Lay down your burden, lay it on my neck,
And I will bear it for you. Cast aside
Your sins : learn love and holiness and peace !' "
The stranger ceased. For some brief moments' space
An unaccustomed silence brooded round ;
Then, as if shaking off unwelcome thought,
Gay jest and jocund laughter reigned anew.

X.

As one who harkens wondering to some strain
Of novel harmonies, nor can descry
The fulness of the meaning of those sweet
Far-reaching modulations, but perplexed
And baffled, seeks in vain to seize some clue
To guide him through their beauteous labyrinth,

The Magdalene had listened to the words
Of the young knight; and now, neglected all
Her customed court of ardent worshippers,
Soft as a snowflake from her couch she slid,
And o'er the rose-strewn pavement gliding slow,
In silence vanished through the sculptured door.

XI.

Across the threshold of her chamber passed
The Magdalene with inward look intent,
Nor stayed her onward step, nor glanced upon
The flower-crowned altar and the marble form
Of Aphrodite smiling from her niche,
The silver bed by laughing loves upheld,
Thick strewn with rose leaves its cerulean folds,
The alabaster vases in whose cups
Their perfumed lamps were burning to diffuse
A dreamy twilight through the softened room;
These she passed by unheeding, and toward
The broad and open balcony moved on,
And there she paused. Below, the garden lay,

And from above the quiet moon shone down.
But on the lovely brow of Magdalene
Hovered a strange unrest. With claspèd hands
She stood and gazed upon the shades beneath,
Then turned her deep look upward to the skies,
While new and vague emotions trembled o'er
The fair, transparent mirror of her face.

XII.

Vainly she sought to read the meaning right
Of that strange tale the Roman knight had told.
Like to a wandering wave-borne leaf, her thought
Lay floating helpless on the heaving sea
Before her untaught powers, till fatigue
Vanquished her wavering efforts, and she turned
To rest her mind upon the well-known past.
Her childish life rose up before her, far
By the blue waves of the Corinthian gulf,
Her gentle mother in their cottage home
Beneath the vine-clad hill, her father's voice
Of greeting glad, when from his vessel's side

He called his welcome to them as they stood
And laughed for joy to see his face again, —
That alien Jewish father with his name
Baruch of Magdala. And then she saw
Her youthful mother dying, and again
She heard her mournful wail, "My precious one!
Ah woe is me, thou art so beautiful!"
And then she saw the white-robed priests who came,
Her mother dead, and carried her away
Unto the gorgeous temple glittering fair
With sculptures, glowing with resplendent hues
On its rich-pictured walls. There wealth of flowers
Made odorous the air that pulsed beneath
The weight melodious of sweet songs breathed forth
By fresh young voices, hymning high the praise
Of foam-born Aphrodite; while the porch
Stood widely open to invite the crowd
Of worshippers who changeful filled the fane,
Bringing rich gifts in joyous homage laid
Upon the hundred altars that between
The shining ranks of leafy columns white
Stood ready to receive their offerings.

XIII.

There had she passed her days of early youth,
There learned to chant the ringing odes of praise,
To strike the sounding cithern, and to weave
The graceful circles of the mystic dance
That daily imaged to the fringing crowd
The worship of the goddess whom she served.
There had she lived, caressed and praised by all
Who ministered beneath the temple roof,
Proclaimed the favorite priestess of the shrine;
While gifts more costly than all others brought
Were laid upon the altars by the hands
Of those whose lips pressed kisses on her feet.

XIV.

Till that dread day when, bursting through the crowd
Of wine-flushed votaries and flower-crowned priests
Around her as she led the mystic dance,
Her father, long unseen, had made his way,
And seized her by the arm, and impious words

Dishonoring the deity, had shrieked.
And then the tumult and the angry cries
And threatening gestures, that had made her swoon
Upon the floor with chill and anguished fright.
And then again she saw the haggard face
Of that dear father as he bent above
Her couch that night and whispered, "Come with me,
My daughter; flee from this accursèd place
And come with me!" Again she followed on
Through the dark corridors and vacant halls,
Until they stood without; then made their way
Unto the rocking boat that bore them thence
Across the waves. Again she saw his face
Show white and ghastly in the early dawn.
Poison had tipped the dagger's point which deep
Into his side had pierced in that fierce fray
With Aphrodite's raging priests; and thus
He died, imploring with his latest breath
That to Judea she would flee, nor make
Again her home within those temple walls
Whence he had ransomed her at well spent cost
Of his own life.

XV.

Why did her father loathe
And dread that gorgeous temple where each day
Passed in rejoicing dances, and in song?
Why did he call the priests accursed who taught
Her and her young companions how to please?
Sacred was Aphrodite. Were not all
Her high behests to be obeyed with joy!
And yet her father had blasphemed that name
With words of direst hatred. — Then he held
Another faith; — perchance his faith was true!
What was that faith? How should she know the truth?
And he, this peasant teacher, he whose words
Had stirred such vague disquiet in her mind,
What did he mean when he besought that throng
To seek for love and holiness and peace?
Surely he meant some other love from that
Which had been taught her in the far-off fane.
And holiness — the word she did not know —
And peace, oh yes, she could imagine peace,
It must be that she longed for, but in vain.

Anew the misty veil of troubled thought
Floated across her youthful face, anew
She gazed up to the distant sky, as though
Seeking its answer to her questionings.

XVI.

At length she turned and called to her the guard
Who kept his watch beside her chamber door,
And forth upon the terrace came the form
Of a tall Nubian slave. His ebon chest
And sinewy arms dark shone like polished bronze,
His yellow vest was cinctured with broad gold,
A short two-edgèd sword beside him hung;
And in a leash of twisted silver led,
A tawny hunting leopard flecked with black,
Followed with head low bent and stealthy tread.
"Go to the stranger Probus: say to him
That I await him here." The slave passed thence
With homage reverential; and again
The Magdalene gazed upward to the sky
And softly whispered, "holiness and peace!"

XVII.

A step impatient crossed the chamber floor,
And close beside her stood the Roman knight,
Flushed and expectant. Eagerly he caught
Her hand, and on its yielding velvet pressed
His hurried kisses. Gently from his clasp
The hand was drawn, and her calm voice outbreathed,
"Not so, O Probus; not for this I called
Thee to my side. To-night I worship not,
Nor honor Aphrodite. I would ask
Of thee alone, if thou canst answer me,
Some question that myself I cannot solve."
"Speak, beauteous one," thus Probus, "speak, and I
Will answer as I may thy questionings;
But say not that to-night thou wilt not pay
Due homage to the goddess!" And his look
Scanned the young charms that lay beneath her robe
Of silvery gauze, and revelled in the sight.
"Words thou hast spoken that disturb my breast,"
She slowly answered, "and I fain would learn
The meaning that they hold. I know of peace

In part, not wholly ; but, what is that love
Of which the peasant told them? I was taught
In the Corinthian fane, 'twas love to fill
The cup of joy to all who yearned to taste.
But this he cannot mean. That cup of joy
Grows heavy in my hands, my shrinking lips
Are weary of its taste. It gives no peace.
And holiness — how sweet the word — I know
Its meaning not, but yet I love the sound:
Tell me, O Probus, what is holiness?"

XVIII.

A mocking flicker gleamed within the eyes
Of the young knight. "Oh thou fair cozening snake!"
He mentally exclaimed, "how deep the art
They taught thee in bright Corinth!" Then he spoke,
His proud lip curving with sarcastic scorn.
"It is a Jewish word, a Jewish thing,
Unmeet for such warm lips as these, unfit
For harbor in this soft and snowy breast.
The priests in gladsome Corinth taught thee well.
Thou hast no need for other faith than this,

To scatter pleasure where thy light feet tread,
To joy in all that life and youth can give,
To worship Venus, and due honor pay
To all her voice proclaims as fair and good."
He closer drew, and round her supple form
He clasped his nervous arm. She heeded not,
But gazed afar with wistful dreamy eyes.
The night wind brought the odors from below,
Faint and delicious, an enchanted hush
Deep wrapt the sleeping garden. Bending down
His head he looked into her moonlit face;
And as he looked, he saw her rose-lips move,
And heard her murmur, "holiness and peace!"

XIX.

"O Magdalene, my lovely one," he prayed,
"Hast thou no word, no look to give to me?
Thou needest not these arts of coy delay.
See how the flowers gently droop their heads,
And rest upon each other in sweet sleep;
See how the moonlight's silvery kiss is prest
Upon the tender grass and bending shrubs;

See, all invites to love! Behold, I sue
E'en at thy feet — I never knelt before,
My Magdalene, fill up to me the cup,
The mantling cup of joy: delay no more!"
Sadly she turned her golden head and looked
On the impassioned suitor at her feet.
"Probus," she said, "thou art not like to those
Who crowd around me in Jerusalem.
I felt a new and potent strength within
Thy words to-night when, braving the rude scorn
Of my ill-mannered guests, thou didst unfold
Strange doctrines spoken by that peasant poor.
Behold, I have no friend. I dimly feel
There is a something better than this life
Which I have led till now. A vague unrest
Torments me, and faint whisperings in the air
Come to disquiet me with shadowy hopes
And painful thrilling fears. Something there is
That lies beyond the circle of my days.
My faith was not my father's faith, for he
Abhorred great Aphrodite. How shall I,
O Probus, search the mystery within

My breast? How learn what the unknown may be
That calls me with its half-heard tones, and stirs
Such longing and disquiet in my heart?"

XX.

As the pure voice its low complaining spoke,
Made eloquent by earnest pleading eyes,
Sincere and truthful, through the knight there sped
A dart of keen conviction. This was truth!
No artful weaving of a shameless net
To snare him more securely in her toils.
His mind, well trained in the great schools of Greece,
Could follow in its course her troubled thought.
Within the famed hetaira's breast he found
A blind and struggling soul that vainly longed
For light, for truth. And with this thought there
came
A rush of tenderness within his heart,
Tempering the sensual fire that had burned
At sight of her, unsoftened until now.
All that was best and noblest in him drew
With sudden impulse toward that lovely one,

So sinful and so sinless! To possess
Her love became the hunger of his heart.
"Say, Probus, canst thou help?" With hands outstretched,
Her sweet face anxiously she bent on him,
As one who pleads for a most precious boon.

XXI.

He rose, and mastering his throbbing will,
Calmly he spoke. "Yes, Magdalene, I know
All thou dost seek to learn." — A flash of joy
With quick irradiation lit her look.—
"O child, thou deemest thou has learnt the lore
Of love, for so those false priests taught thee; but
Love's secret lies beyond. Not joy of sense
Alone is love: love is that finer thought
That does inform the deeper soul of man
With keen desire for another soul,
In which its hunger for the beautiful
Shall find at last its sweet and longed-for food.
Such is the love thou needest, Magdalene.
E'en as thy form, thy soul is beautiful;

It craves for union with another soul,
And solitary mourns its lonely lot.
Listen, belovèd one, and I will teach
A deeper lore than any thou hast learnt.
Give to my soul thine own, and thou shalt know
What the great gods' best gift to man has been.
The still closed petals of thy heart shall ope
As flowers open to the sun's soft light.
The vague disquiet of thy breast shall melt
As clouds of night before day's tender dawn.
Come to my arms; there shalt thou find thy rest,
Thy every hope, thy every dream fulfilled!"
Earnest his deep tones thrilled upon the air,
Fervent the look he bent upon her face.
She still spoke; "But, Probus, I would learn
Of holiness: thou teachest but of love!"

XXII.

A sudden whirl of burning passion swept
Throughout his frame. He smote upon his brow
With his clenched hand. "Thrice cursed fool was I
To tell thee of this prating Nazarene!

What are his words to thee? Thou know'st not him,
Nor ever will know. That man loves thee not:
He cannot love thee, being what thou art.
The holiness thou seekest is a bar
For ever raised between thy soul and his.
But I — I love thee, branded as thou art
By pious scorn: I love thee, Magdalene!
Give me thy love, and I will bear thee hence,
And 'mid the splendors of imperial Rome
Will live for thee, will love but thee alone!"
He caught her in his eager arms, and pressed
Devouring kisses on her rippling hair,
Her brow, her cheek, her lips. With faint, low cry
She tore herself away, and through the gloom
Fled like a shadowy vision from his view.

XXIII.

Silent he stood. The great veins in his throat
Sent crowding currents to his surging brain.
The moonlight streamed upon the grassy lawns,
A bird sang softly in the midnight hush,
A faint breeze stirred the branches of the trees.

Slowly his calm returned. A bitter smile
Wreathed his stern lips. "A whim, a passing whim!"
He sneering muttered. "She is like her kind.
As clouds upon the wind-tormented sky
Their fancies come and go.— She pines for Greece.
An alien in this harsh, barbaric land,
She longs again for Corinth, and the gay
And flower-scented pleasures of her days
In that, her early home.— It were as wise
To plant an acorn in a fountain's cup,
And look to see it grow, as to believe
This change from all she has been, to a life
That deals with problems such as these her sick
And yearning fancy broods on to my cost.
But she will change again ; and I can wait.
No Vestal art thou, Mary Magdalene!"

Part Second.

I.

THE sun shone bright on great Jerusalem
Proud towering from the plain. Toward her gates,
Covering the winding roads and hill-side paths,
Came crowding on a mighty multitude.
The Passover with solemn summons called
All pious Jews within those sacred walls,
There to rejoice together that the Lord
Had smitten down their cruel enemy
In ancient times ; had wrung old Egypt's heart
With anguish for the death of its best loved,
And so had set his chosen people free!
Gray-headed sires leaning on their staves,
And little children with short tottering steps,
And stalwart fathers with their sun-browned wives,

Their youthful daughters and their hardy sons,
Each bearing wallet or some scanty scrip,
Or leading fleecy lamblings for the feast ;
Toiled on toward the consecrated gates.
Broad, heavy chariots, drawn by oxen dight
With gaudy trappings, leaning wide apart,
Patient, with plodding tread, pursued their path;
And covered litters curtained close, upborne
By half-stripped forms of panting servants, blocked
The life-encumbered ways ; while horsemen wound
Amid the journeying throngs, and frequent droves
Of the meek beasts foredoomed to sacrifice,
And camels turning vicious, sidelong looks,
Their tall necks rising high above the crowd,
Their round humps laden with vast wicker crates
Holding the terrified and heaped-up doves
That rigid Jewish rites demanded, mixed
In one inextricable mass beneath
The frowning city walls. Still on they poured
From morn till low the sun began to sink,
And scattered grew the groups, and faint the sounds
That had throughout the long day beat the air.

II.

But then came hurrying to the gate that looked
Toward Bethany dark nestling 'neath its trees,
Fleet messengers who, breathless entering, spread
Their tidings through the city. On the hill
Appeared a serried mass ; and from the gate
Outburst in crowding waves a multitude,
With joyous cries and high uplifted palms
Their greeting greenly waving. Nearer came
The dense procession through the sunset sheen ;
And shouts of triumph rang, and chanted song,
" Hosanna to the son of David, King !
Hosanna to the great Messiah, come
To save God's chosen people, and to lead
Them forth to victory ! " And as they drew
Closer, the dark mass opened, and was seen
One riding on a meek and snow-white ass
Which gently trode along the green-strewn way
As though it loved the burden that it bore.
And as the multitude, come forth to meet
Their great Messiah, gazed upon that One,

A look of reverent wonder slowly fell
Upon all faces, with accordant awe.

III.

Clad in a robe of coarse and dark-hued wool
Girded about him with a leathern cord,
Upon his feet rough sandals, travel worn,
The Jewish Prophet looked a Heaven-born King!
Calm on his smooth, broad brow, command sate throned,
His clear, full opened eye with powerful glance
Seemed through the secrets of each heart to pierce
With vision supernaturally keen,
Yet filled with a compassion all divine.
Supremest peace its stamp sublime had pressed
On those firm-moulded lips, which wordless breathed
The inspiration of immortal love.
A solemn joy, an awful tenderness
Rayed forth from that still face; while silence spread
A pulsing hush around him, as the waves
Of human life, wide parting, swayed aside
In act of homage, as the Prophet came.

IV.

Beneath a shadowy olive tree beside
The crowded way, there stood a sight full fair,
Which on another day had drawn the gaze
Of all the curious crowd; yet now unmarked.
Close guarded by a band of armèd slaves,
Their scarlet tunics blazing in the sun,
A sumptuous litter carved with rarest skill,
Mother of pearl and gold, upon the necks
Of its strong bearers rested. On its height
Of rosy, pearl-embroidered cushions lay
The graceful form of Mary Magdalene,
Daintily sheltered from the westering rays
By canopy of peacock feathers wove,
Clad in pale azure robes of Grecian fold,
Whence gleamed her snow-white arms and jewelled feet,
And crowned with wreathing braids of golden hair.

V.

Since that first day when on her listening ear
Had come the tidings of the lowly One

Who taught the people doctrines strange and new,
And promised to the weary-hearted, rest;
She had with constant effort sought to know
More of this latest Prophet. When each night
Around her costly banquet gathered all
Her wonted court, attentively she bent
Her hearing to each word that spoke of him.
And day by day more constantly her guests
Of this new Teacher told. With bitter scorn
The Pharisees reproached his unbelief
Of all their law held sacred; called him brand
Of hell-fire cast within their temple walls,
Which, not extinguished, would consume them all
In the destruction of their ancient faith.
The mocking Greeks sneered at his lofty aim
To curb the headstrong impulses of man,
Holding a standard up which gods themselves
Might well despair of reaching. Romans smiled
In cold contempt as at an alien feud
Betwixt two parties in a subject state,
Which they could crush at will. But no one spoke
Such words as Probus, since unseen, had said

When he, that Teacher's words repeating, filled
Her heart with wistful thoughts. Then summoning
The trustiest of her slaves, the Nubian,
She sent him forth to seek among the throngs
Crowding the temple and each market-place,
For tidings of that One. And he brought back
Stories most strange. The blind beheld the light
At his command, the fevered sick were healed,
The life-long palsied stood upon their feet,
And at his word the buried dead arose!

VI.

She bade him back to ask if Jesus were
Mild, gentle in his tones, compassionate
Of visage; whether hate and scorn for those
Who knew him not abode within his breast.
For since the scathing words of Probus fell
Upon her ear, her timid heart had failed
Beneath the burden of a formless fear.
"Why was it that this Prophet would not deign
To give to her the love he taught that man
Owed to his fellow-man? What was the bar

That holiness had raised for aye between
His soul and hers? And what that holiness?
And why for ever? What did Probus know
About the life beyond the dreadful Styx?
In the Elysian fields perchance her soul
Might meet with his o'er plains of asphodel
Slow gliding on, with light immortal crowned:
And he might look on her, and might caress
With gentle hand her lowly bended head;
Might smile upon her in that spirit land
Within whose bounds no shadowy bar might be!"

VII.

Then from his quest the messenger returned.
"The Prophet hated and contemned alone
The Pharisees and hypocrites who robbed
Widows and orphans of their scanty crust,
Pretexting tribute for the temple, where
The Scribes sate, vexing sore the patient poor
With imposts heavy and most hard to bear.
On these he poured forth fierce, indignant scorn,
And scourged with wrathful words until they slunk

Silently cowering thence like beaten hounds,
But to all others he was ever mild.
He fed the hungry who around him stood
Forgetful of their need, the while they hung
Upon his words; he pitied all who mourned.
He called young children to him, on his knees
He held their wondering forms, and bade his friends
Learn of their meekness and their purity;
Warning them as those children to become
If they would enter that great kingdom's gates
Whereof he came to tell." — She sate in thought. —
"Then purity was there; a child was pure
Leading its childlike life. Her life was not
Like to a child's life of unconscious days.
Could purity and holiness be one?"

VIII.

And so she dwelt in silent questionings.
A spiritual hunger daily grew
Within her breast, a longing vast and vague;
An aspiration to a something high
Above all she had known; until this day

Her slave had tidings brought that ere the night
Jesus of Nazareth, the Prophet, would
Enter the walls of great Jerusalem.
And she had thither come, and waited long,
Fearing to lose her timorous hope, to see
The Prophet as he passed upon his way
Unnoting her, who smitten with the dread
That seeing her and hating her were one,
Because of that strange holiness which raised
Its unknown bar between her soul and his,
Lay in her pomp of beauty, with her heart
Fast beating 'neath her gorgeous canopy.

IX.

At last the Nubian, from the hillock where
He stood and watched, came hurrying to her side.
"Behold, he comes!" And moving hastily
She knelt upon her litter, raised above
The surging crowd, amid the tossing boughs
Of feathery palms. Her eager eyes she bent
Upon the coming form. Her hands she clasped
Above her bosom, seeking to hold down

Its quick, tumultuous throbbings. And he saw!
Jesus of Nazareth saw the Magdalene!
The eye that loved the beauty of the flowers
Rested upon that flower-like face. His look,
Piercing and puissant, clove that pearly breast
And saw the struggling human soul within
That blindly yearned for purity and love.
He saw her past, he knew her as she was,
And a divine compassion stirred his heart.
A look of mournful pity gave response
To her imploring eyes. So passed he on,
And the great multitude closed round his form
And followed him toward the city gate.

X.

She did not weep, she did not cowering hide
Her face within her hands as she had feared
To do, remembering Probus' cruel words,
Beneath the Prophet's look of stern rebuke.
A strength undreamed of, from the Saviour's gaze
Flowed in upon her heart. She felt a new
Transforming power move within her soul,

Which drew her on she knew not how, yet felt
That she must follow the great Prophet's steps:
There was the answer to her questionings!
But as her servants turned to bear her thence
From 'neath the shadowy olive, and she bent
Her lingering glance upon the green-strewn way
Where she the form of Jesus had beheld,
His look of mournful meaning smote upon
Her memory with sudden, vivid flash.
"What had those godlike eyes descried in her
That brought such depth of pity to their gaze?
Had not the priests oft told her she was fair,
Fairest of Aphrodite's favorites?
Had she not all that life and youth could give?
What did she lack? And yet he pitied her!
Had that all-piercing ken beheld the bar
Raised by that mystic holiness? What was
That haunting holiness? It was perchance
Something she yet might win!" And gladdening hope
Rose in the bosom of the Magdalene,
Sweet mingling with the deep and forceful want
That filled her soul with its imperious need,

As 'mid the hurrying of the eager crowd
Toward the massy gate she followed 'neath
Her canopy slow waving to and fro
In cadence with her bearers' measured tread,
While far above, the golden sunset sky
Bright with a radiance of new beauty shone.

XI.

And so they bore her to her stately home,
White gleaming 'mid its deep embowered shade
Of graceful cypresses and tufted palms.
As in a dream, she crossed the echoing hall
Circled by statues with unsleeping life,
And half unconsciously, she glided on
Across the polished floors of precious stone
Which mirrored her fair form and azure robes,
Until she neared the rich embroidered folds
That curtained deep her guarded chamber door.
But there she seemed to wake. Abrupt she paused,
Sudden drew back, and with a sign forbade
The waiting slave who ready stood to part
Those draperies; then turning to a stair

That upward led to the broad terraced roof,
She sought the solitude and stillness where,
Uplifted o'er the city's hum of life,
Fragrant and hushed, a little garden lay.
Beneath its sheltering vault high arched from shafts
Of slender, sculptured stone, a fountain played
That tossed its diamond sparkles in the air,
Besprinkling dew upon the quivering shrubs
And starry flowers that around it bent.
This was her favorite haunt, here would she muse
Long, silent hours by the cool fountain's brink,
With vibrant touch her ivory lyre would sound,
And sing the odes learnt in a far-off land.

XII.

Soon as her sandalled feet had pressed the moss
That carpeted that high, secluded spot,
To meet her coming a gazelle sprang forth,
Its liquid eyes with welcome shining bright,
While from the latticed cages placed around
Arose a joyous tumult of glad calls,

And sound of fluttering wings' impatient beat,
As all the little minstrels sought to catch
The gentle eye and ear of her they loved.
Their love was precious to her thirsting heart,
Forlorn and lonely in its gilded lot;
It had the power to win her from the thoughts
Rising in new-born majesty within
Her dimly wakening soul. With childlike smile
She oped their tiny gates: they circled round
The golden tresses of her graceful head,
Then perched upon her dimpled shoulders bare,
And nestled in her soft enfolding arms,
Until their evening greeting was fulfilled,
And in their airy homes they peaceful slept.
While she, reclining on a marble chair,
Her smooth cheek resting on her velvet hand,
The shy gazelle close couching by her side,
Leaned, gazing forth upon the deepening sky
With eyes that saw alone the Master's face.
Her past had faded utterly away,
And of the present knew she only this,
That Jesus silent called her life to him

With summons inarticulate, yet deep
Resounding in her soul.

XIII.

A light step broke
The silence, and a fair Athenian boy
With garland decked, advanced and bending low
Craved humbly that the banquet might no more
Await her coming; for her lordly guests
Impatient of her absence, marvelled loud,
No greeting from their hostess to receive.
Slow to her feet she rose, and gazed around
As seeking for the sense of words that strange
And void of meaning sounded on her ear.
Then through her frame a deep, long shiver ran:
The Prophet's face had vanished, and she was
Again that Mary, called the Magdalene.
But 'neath that consciousness she felt a will
That stronger than her own, constrained her words,
Charging her servants with attentive care
And courtesy to minister unto
Her guests, while she in solitude remained.

In wondering thought the graceful Grecian youth
Turned on his errand. As his lithe form passed
Noiseless away, she called her constant guard,
The gold-girt Nubian, and mission gave
To learn where Jesus tarried for the night.
One only thought she had, to seek for him.
A strange mysterious instinct bore her on,
Awful yet sweet compulsion of her soul.

XIV.

As the moon rose, through a dark postern gate,
Leaving the sound of revelry and song
That from within her flower-strewn banquet hall
Streamed loud and fitful, forth the Magdalene,
Close followed by a band of armèd slaves
Led by the Nubian, passed into the gloom
That wrapt the city's bound. A shrouding veil
Concealed her golden hair and vesture rich.
The tender feet that ne'er before had trode
The common street, now meekly tracked their way
Across the broken and disjointed paths
That led her at the last unto a long

And lowly building raised against the wall,
Hard by the space where the Great Temple reared
Its shining roof into the moonlit sky.
But all was hushed and still: the close-barred gate
And narrow windows blank and stirless showed
In that mute hour. Entrance she dared not crave.
What claim had she to urge importunate
Her unknown presence on that wondrous One,
The Jewish Prophet-King? With throbbing breast
She stood incredulous. It could not be
That she had sought in vain! That inner voice
Which called her forth, no mockery had proved!
It was no dæmon summons from the dread
And shivering confines of the nether world
Had lured her from her home! But as still lapsed
The leaden moments, and no sound within
Gave witness of the presence of that One
Whose pitying glance she came once more to meet,
A bitter wave of disappointment chill
Rose and benumbed her heart. Her yearning hopes,
Quivering and bruised, sank down: their life died out
In sharp and shuddering pain. A dumb despair

Crept, crushing every struggling thought within.
Anguished she turned her faint, reluctant steps
To leave the lonely and deserted spot,
When rising softly in rich-blended tone
Of human pathos and of heaven-born might,
A solemn canticle of prayer and praise
Swelled on the midnight hush. A strain it was
Such as the listening stars have never heard
Again since that last eve when Jesus' voice
* Intoned the hymn his followers upraised.
Deep and more deep the waves sonorous flowed,
Full and more full they poured upon her ear:
They bore her on their harmony sublime
Upward, still upward, till amid the stars
Her spirit seemed to float. A peace profound,
A lofty calm, a fervent joy, instilled
Through all her being; and a strength undreamed,
Mighty and forceful, held her soul within
Its clasp majestic; while upon her breathed
Compassionate, a tenderness divine.

* Matthew xxvi. 30. Mark xiv. 26.

XV.

That strain unearthly set her spirit free :
A sacred love flamed upward in her breast.
All ignorant she stood, yet to her heart
The gates of Heaven opened, ere her mind
Had trode the first steps of the holy way
Of wisdom and of truth. A portent high
Of saving love had snatched her from the life
She knew not how to hate. She gazed above
With unveiled head thrown back. Her bosom heaved,
Tears slowly welling stole adown her cheeks,
* And lifting up her arms she suppliant stood,
Invoking silently the Unknown God.

XVI.

As though retiring upward to the sky,
The sounds majestic died upon her ear,
And silence softly sank on all around ;
Yet still the harp-strings of her being thrilled,

* See note, page v.

Vibrating with a new, mysterious sense,
Sweet, awful dawning of the spirit life!
Solemn and bright the golden moon shone down,
And from the starry depths a splendor gleamed
Like distant waving of celestial wings,
As to the alien shelter of her home,
Her wondering soul inorbed with heavenly light,
The Magdalene, Christ's miracle, returned.

XVII.

And ever from that day, where Jesus taught,
In the still coolness of the early dawn,
Standing within the crowded market-place
Amid the simple country folk who brought
The bright-hued products of their narrow lands;
The hardy fishermen who from the shores
Of deep blue lakes had borne their glistening spoils;
The shepherds who the younglings of the flock
Reluctantly had led from dewy meads;
While all, close gathered, reverently heard
Wise speech of gentle counsel from his lips;

There, standing on the farthest verge, was seen
A youthful figure wrapt in shrouding veil
And sweeping robes of dark and shadowy fold,
Still followed by a swarthy Nubian slave,
Who in a silver leash a leopard led.

XVIII.

When in the scorching noon, beneath the shade
Of the Great Temple's lofty portico,
Its vistas opening into spacious courts
Magnificent with cedar-work and gold,
And hung with wondrous glowing draperies
Of ruddy crimson and resplendent blue,
Filled with the pilgrims who from morn till night
Passed ceaselessly toward the Holy Place
Of their stern country's fierce and ancient faith;
His solemn tones of urgent warning rang:
Amid the host of scowling Pharisees
Wearing broad-bordered garments, jealous Scribes
And subtle Doctors of the Law, who sought
With cunning questions and insidious art

To draw some fatal sentence from his lips
Which, falsely commented, might set aflame
The sleeping fury of the fiery Jews,
Giving pretext to stone him where he stood;
There, on the border of the curious throng
That pressed to trap him in his speech, or shrunk
Crouching beneath his malediction stern,
The scathing rain of his indignant words,
Was ever seen that mute and listening form.

XIX.

When the cool softness of the evening fell,
As 'mid the people Jesus walked abroad,
And crowding round him came the helpless ones,
The blind, the sick, the maimed, brought to his feet
By those who loved them, that the Prophet might
With powerful word restore them to their arms
Made whole again, and healed of their hurt;
Or when he trode through dark and winding lanes,
Through foul and noisome corners, stifling courts,
Wherever poverty and wretchedness

Dragged out the slow, sad torment of their days,
And ignorance and stupid blindness wrought
Their close-drawn web to bind the spirit's eyes,
And untaught bigotry proclaimed the Law
That daily ground them to the earth as just,
And greed rapacious sought to snare the poor
Still poorer than itself, and mourners wept
Disconsolate alone, and conscience strove
With choking sense of sin, and weary toil
Sought feverish for rest; still followed him,
The shadow of that silent neophyte.

XX.

As tender mother teaches little child
By simple story, that its feeble thought
Along the pictured path of wisdom may
With tottering steps be gently guided on
Until it reach at last the distant heights
Whence the great sea of truth shall meet its eye;
So Jesus taught the people, leading on
Their minds toward his truth by flowery ways

Of parable, of simple, childlike tales,
To feed the growing want that held them hushed
Hearkening in reverence to his ministering,
That ministry of love. The Magdalene,
Childlike in ignorance, her thought athirst
For that diviner knowledge which the priests
Had never taught in her far-distant home,
Stood earnest listening to the words that fell
From the firm lips of Jesus. Day by day
They sank upon her heart like blessèd rain,
Calling the secret powers that lay within,
Deep buried, forth to beauty and to life.
And as the world of spirit to her eye
Dawned in its dim-seen majesty of light,
Slowly her conscience roused ; until there came,
Supreme and awful, that awakening flash
When by illumination dread, distinct,
She saw the image of that holiness
She sought with deepest craving to behold.
With high translated vision she discerned
The mirror of her past, and knew herself
The desecrated temple of a soul !

XXI.

Dim sank the twilight o'er the busy street
Whereon a lordly mansion raised its front,
The home of a rich Pharisee. A crowd
Of humble poor stood gathered at the gate
Waiting to see the coming forth of him
Who all the city stirred; for Jesus sate
At meat within the high-born ruler's house.
And as they stood and watched, a youthful form,
Shrouded and veiled, passed slow athwart the throng,
Bearing a vase of alabaster, carved,
And set with stones of price. She neared the gate
And asked for entrance; and the servants looked
Upon the precious vase, and passage made
For her who came with such resplendent gift.

XXII.

Fair was the spacious room, and graced with all
That wealth could buy or luxury devise.
Frescos of Grecian art adorned the walls,
On Roman couches richly cushioned o'er

The guests reclined around the lavish board ;
Silent they lay, the while their cold eyes turned
With curious question in their haughty look
Upon one form the ruler's place beside,
Which rested wearily as though the day
Of labor had its strength full sorely tried.
Low whispering among themselves the train
Of debtors and of bondmen passed around,
And eager watched for word that yet might come
From him they knew the dauntless friend of all
The poor and the oppressed, the hated foe
Of their relentless master and his sect.

XXIII.

Awhile that shrouded form stood motionless
Within the portal of the long-roofed hall,
Trembling and silent; then she forward moved
With faltering steps until she reached the couch
Where Jesus lay reclined. Upon her knees
She sank beside his feet; her veil fell back,
And all beheld the golden waving hair,

The lovely face of Mary Magdalene.
She oped the vase ; its costly perfume filled
The spacious room ; she bent above those feet
Fevered with loving toil. Her lips she pressed
With timid touch upon them, and the while
She bathed them with her warm, fast-flowing tears,
Then wiped them with the gold of her long hair,
Still kissing them, as if that act of love
Were all of hope the earth contained for her.
Then from the open vase she ointment poured
Of priceless worth upon them, sobbing deep
As one whose heart is breaking in its pain.
And Jesus turned his eyes and saw the look
Of scornful wonder running round the board,
And heard the inner echo of their thoughts ;
And spake to him, the ruler of the feast,
" Simon, somewhat to say to thee I have."
He coldly answered, " Master, say thou on."

XXIV.

Each sound was stilled, and every breath was hushed
As Jesus raised his deep, vibrating voice

And said, "There was a certain creditor
Who had two debtors; one to him did owe
Five hundred pence, fifty the other owed:
And seeing that they nothing had to pay,
He freely both forgave. Now tell me which
Of those whom he forgave will love him most?"
The ruler answered with contemptuous smile,
"He whom he most forgave." And Jesus said,
"Most rightly hast thou judged." Then stretching forth
His hand toward Magdalene, he slowly spoke;
"Seest thou this woman? When within thine house
I came, thou gav'st no water for my feet;
But she has washed my feet with rain of tears,
And wiped them with her hair. No greeting kiss
Thou gavest me; but she has ceasèd not
To kiss my feet. No oil thou brought'st to pour
Upon my head; but she upon my feet
Has poured out ointment. Wherefore do I say
Her sins, and they are many, are forgiven,
For she has lovèd much." He turned and looked
On her that was a sinner, as she knelt
With low bowed head and golden streaming hair,

Veiling the shame-struck anguish of her face
From the stern gaze of hostile eyes, all bent
Upon her shrinking form ; and in a voice
Of tender, yearning pity, Jesus said,
"Woman, thou art forgiven ; go in peace !"

Part Third.

I.

PORTENTOUS, heavy with thick, thunderous gloom,
Dark clouds the heavens shrouded on that day,
When high upon his cross God's chosen One
Was raised to die by impious hands of men.
Against the lurid sky his head stood forth
Crowned with sharp thorns in bitter sign of scorn.
Those gracious hands that healed the helpless sick,
Gave sight unto the blind, now bruised and torn,
Were nailed with iron spikes unto the wood
Which deep stained drank their blood. Those earnest feet
That brought the beauty of glad tidings, pierced
With anguished wounds, distilled slow dropping gore.

Slowly its life was ebbing from his frame,
Yet still that mighty heart retained its love,
That massive brain its strength. With steadfast eyes
Gazing above, he prayed those words divine,
"Father, forgive: they know not what they do!"

II.

And at the sound the seething crowd grew still:
The angry cries of fierce, vindictive hate,
The mocking jeers, the scoffing taunts, were hushed.
A chill and shuddering awe sank deep within
Those hot and furious hearts; a human pang
Wrung with its unaccustomed thrill those breasts
Of bigots and of outcasts, flocked to see
The lingering torments of the Prophet's death;
And with a sudden fear they turned away,
Smiting their breasts, and left him there alone.

III.

A group of women on that bleak hill-side
All through the dreadful day had stood and watched
While the tumultuous surging of the crowd

Rising and falling round that fearful cross
Forbade them to approach. But now they came,
Pallid and weeping, and beside his feet
With choking sobs they took their faithful stand.
Yet one was there who neither sobbed nor shrank,
Favored of God, the Mother of the Lord.
She stood with steadfast face and look sublime:
On her uplifted brow a lambent light
Descended from the dark and lurid sky,
As though her sight had pierced the deep-massed clouds,
Cleaving a passage for celestial rays.
Within her eyes prophetic vision spoke,
She saw the full completion of that day.
The Past, the Present, and the Future, kept
Their watch beside her through those hours supreme;
Voices swept onward from all coming time,
And heralded Creation's Mystery
To her expanding soul. So stood she there,
Uplifted glorious o'er bereavement, raised
By inspiration high above all pain;
Stronger than Grief, more resolute than Death,
The Mighty Mother of a Son Divine.

IV.

And with her came the ghost of Magdalene,
For such it seemed. No tears her dry eyes shed;
Dilated with unutterable woe
They straining gazed on that majestic face
Which gave its silent greeting to his friends
Even in that dread hour. Her pallid lips,
Parted with horror, sent their struggling breath,
In heavy gasps; her hands, convulsive clenched,
Were pressed upon her forehead, as to chain
The agony of frenzied thought within.
"The Saviour of mankind, God's Holy One,
Was dying there in torture on the cross!"
Nought else her mind could seize, nought else she knew
Within the darkling boundaries of space.
Each pang he felt her aching sense returned;
Each fainting groan that told the end was near
Lessened the pulse within her sinking frame:
And when his death-cry sounded on her ear,
And he, her soul's Redeemer, bowed his head
And breathed forth his pure life, thick darkness swept

Its pall about her, and she senseless fell
Prone on the stony earth, in mercy snatched
From grief which woman never knew before.

V.

The anguish of the Sabbath day had throbbed
Through its dark hours of midnight, and was come
The first day of the week, the third from that
Which saw the Saviour die. The early morn
Broke o'er the garden where his form was laid
In silence, and in secrecy and tears,
To rest from anguish in its close-sealed tomb.
Deserted by all else, one mourner there
Beside that rifled couch of stone kept watch,
Weeping, while in her clasping hand she held
The crown of thorns, the all that now remained
To her of him. 'Twas Mary Magdalene.
Sobbing, she prest her shuddering lips to those
Keen points stained cruel crimson with his blood;
She held them to her quivering breast, nor thought

To heed the sharp pain of their pointed darts:
'Twas all she had of him, and he was dead!

VI.

She stood and watched in the chill twilight drear,
While hushed the garden lay in morn's repose;
The cold gray sky as yet revealed no sign
Of rose clouds welcoming the burst of day.
She stood and wept, while aching memory traced
Her life since o'er her bended head those words
Had sounded from his deep and pitying voice,
"Woman, thou art forgiven; go in peace!"
All had she sold of that which she possessed,
To give unto the poor. Her feet had trode
Since then, alone the gloomy precincts where
Disease and want stretched out their starving hands;
Or, following her Master's steps, had gone
Forth 'mid his band of humble friends, to hear
His teachings to the people. And now all
Was ended. On the agonizing cross
Her eyes had seen him die; her ears had heard
His last expiring groan. He who had saved

Her life from sin, had opened to her soul
The way of truth and peace and holiness,
Jesus was dead, and she was desolate!

VII.

And while she wept, upon her consciousness
A form dawned slowly, standing near to her.
Mist-veiled by tears, her blinded eyes she turned
Upon that form, nor knew whom she beheld.
And the Lord spoke to her thus mourning sore;
"Woman, why weepest thou?" he gently said;
"Whom seekest thou?" And still her ears the while
Throbbing in cadence with her sobs, knew not
The voice of him who spoke. With pleading prayer,
Heart-broken and imploring, she replied,
"Oh, Sir, if thou indeed have borne him hence,
Tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will
Take him away." And Jesus looked upon
That loving, lovely face, and said to her,
"Mary!" And sudden recognition came.
The echoing heavens opened and did bow

Themselves in light transcendent at the word!
In transport of thanksgiving love she kneeled,
And reaching forth her glad, entreating hands
Her soul sent up its worship in the cry,
"Master, my Master!" Jesus drew not back,
But said unto her, "Touch me not, for I
Am not ascended to my Father's home.
This spiritual body which thou seest
May suffer not approach of mortal hands.—
Now listen to my words. To thee I come.
Thee have I chosen as my messenger.
Thy lips shall be the first to tell mankind
That I, Christ Jesus crucified, still live.
Go thou from me unto my brethren. Say
Unto them, I ascend unto my God,
And to my Father: to your God I rise,
And to your Father! Go and bear my words."
And looking on her as she knelt, her face
Filled with the tender transport of the pure
And sacred adoration of her heart,
Radiant with glory borrowed from the skies,
The Saviour's gaze breathed forth celestial love:

Then slow dissolving into viewless air
His form majestic vanished from her sight.

VIII.

And she fulfilled that sacred last behest;
His messenger, appointed to proclaim
His resurrection to the waiting world.
She bore unto the sad remorseful band
Of those who had forsaken him, their Lord,
His greeting of forgiving love sublime
Ere he ascended to his God and theirs:
And then we know no more. We know but this,
When Jesus Christ was risen from the dead
He first appeared to Mary Magdalene.

THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS

AND

THE MAIDEN COUNTESS.

THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS.

Not only in that old Venetian city,
  Betwixt the prison and the palace wall,
Oh Bridge of Sighs, across the sullen waters
  Doth thy dark shadow fall.

Athwart the deep sealed current of our being,
  Close hid from curious glance of strangers' eyes,
Close hid from pitying ken of those who love us,
  Rises our Bridge of Sighs.

Across its arch in endless sad procession,
  Have gone, still pass, and shall forever tread,
Our weeping hopes, with slow, reluctant motion,
  To join the silent dead.

The gladsome visions of our childish morning,
The soft, sweet promise of our youthful day,
The noble aspirations of our noontide
All sighing pass that way.

In vain we stretch our yearning arms towards them
With wild entreaty and imploring moan ;
The dying echo of their footsteps ceases,
And we are left alone.

Alone, beside Life's dark, fast-flowing river,
While through the bitter tears that dim our eyes,
We see the pageant of our hearts' desires
Close on the Bridge of Sighs.

THE MAIDEN COUNTESS.

I.

HIGH on the cliff the gray old castle stood.
Its snow-capped towers 'gainst the moonlit sky
Showed silver white ; below, the icy flood
Of the black river whirled and thundered by ;
Beyond, the plain, as far as eye could see,
Lay glistening in its hoar immensity.

Behind, the dark front of the mountain rose,
Thick set with sleeted pines, 'mid whose array
The skeletons of mighty oak-trees froze
In shrouds of glittering ice, and stirless spray
Of waterfall in fretted crystal gleamed
In the cold moonlight from above that streamed.

Within the castle all was dim and still.
The watch-dog slept beside the iron gate;
The sentinel stood torpid in the chill
And hush of midnight, and the garnished state
And arrassed pomp of gallery and hall
In chequered shadow stood forsaken all:

Save one high chamber on the eastern side
Of the great tower. This was bright aglow
With waxen torches, on its silken pride
Shedding their flickering lustre; while, below,
A carpet, rich with crimson and with gold
From Eastern looms, its deep-hued web unrolled.

Leaning their heads on coffer, or on chair,
In vain essay a fitting watch to keep,
The bright light shining on their braided hair,
Vanquished at last by weariness and sleep,
Four waiting maidens slumbered on their knees,
Their dame's high state precluding greater ease.

Void in its alcove stood the downy bed;
Its carven angels watched on either side,
But watched in vain. Around was dainty spread

All that could minister to beauty's pride.
Such setting did bespeak a precious thing, —
Where was the jewel for this golden ring?

Within a dark-groined oratory knelt
A Lady, youthful and exceeding fair.
The midnight moments glided by unfelt,
So rapt was she in deep and voiceless prayer.
In the still moonlight falling cold and faint
She looked the sculptured image of some saint.

Illumined was the lady's lovely face
With the celestial beauty of a smile,
As, 'mid the silence of that holy place,
She heard ecstatic melodies the while
She watched and prayed ; no fleeting joys of earth
E'er gave the radiance of that smile its birth.

Rising at last, she left the shadowy gloom
As one reluctant leaves some dear delight,
And passed beyond into the stately room,
Rich, warm, and fragrant, with its torches bright ;
As she advanced with even gliding tread,
" Children, awake," the lady gently said.

And starting to their feet, the maidens deft
Quickly disrobed the beauteous dame, then close
The silken curtains drew around, and left
Their high-born lady to the night's repose.
But as she slept, the past stole near and spread
Its haunting visions round her lonely bed.

She saw herself a little timid maid,
In coif of gold, and jewelled chains, bedight,
In trailing folds of silver-wove brocade,
Stand by her new-made spouse, a youthful knight,
With lowering brow. Since then her husband's face
She ne'er had looked on for one moment's space.

Next, clad in mourning for her parents dead,
She saw herself, a slender damsel, sit
Beside her aged chaplain as he read
Some ancient tome to her, with ready wit
Seizing its buried gems of thought to store
Her wond'ring mind with wealth undreamed before.

Next rose before her sleeping eyes a hall
Blazing with light, and gay with shifting crowd
Of dames and knights arrayed for festival

In gorgeous robes and jewels. 'Mid the proud
And stately throng, she saw her lord advance
With a fair lady, leading down the dance.

And as she gazed, the tears began to steal
Through her closed eyelids, and the maiden stirred
As one half conscious who a pain doth feel;
Her breath came fluttering like a wounded bird,
Then with a sob she woke. Awhile she lay
Weeping with patient tears, then 'gan to pray.

The while she prayed, again her soft lids fell,
Again a vision crossed her sleeping eyes.
She heard the organ of a minster swell, —
She knelt by him, her Lord. In sweet surprise
Her parted rose-lips smiled. For God had heard,
And his good angels came and ministered.

II.

Uprose the glorious sun in pomp of pride,
With glittering lances darting up the sky,
And rosy banners flaming far and wide,
Rousing the earth to God's great mystery.
Imaged in Light his gift of Life and Love.
Bright shone the earth beneath the heavens above.

The snowy plain like burnished silver glowed;
Like polished steel the rushing river flashed;
The castle wall and turrets gilded showed.
And where the dizzy waterfall had dashed
Its frozen crystals shimmering, diamond-hued
And rainbow glories lighted up the wood.

And as the sun rose higher, one by one
Came toiling up the steep and rugged way
The sick and aged from the hamlet dun
And scattered cots that round the mountain lay,
For daily did the castle lady feed
The poor and wretched in their bitter need.

Amid these hapless ones the maiden stood,
In tender accents pitying their state
And cheering their sad hearts, while, bringing food
And raiment, her deft damsels on them wait;
When sharp of horses hoofs was heard the clang,
And with a stranger's voice the court-yard rang.

A moment's parley, and then entered quick
The ancient seneschal. His face was flushed,
His hands were trembling, and his words came thick,
As he his message gave. Each sound was hushed
To hear him as he said unto the dame:
"Lady, this moment from Count Egbert came

"A messenger. He begs you to prepare,
At noon to-day, the Emperor to receive,
With all his hunt. He prays especial care
That naught be wanting. They will take their leave
To-morrow, with the breaking of the day.
They are at Wiltern now upon their way."

Dumb stood the maiden for a moment's space,
White grew her cheek, her very lips grew white,
Her heart's keen anguish wrote its writhing trace

On her pure brow, mist rose before her sight;
Then, in a calm, still voice, she spoke and said:
"Let my Lord know his will shall be obeyed."

In robe of azure, broidered o'er with pearls,
The lady stood arrayed. A glittering veil,
Thick set with silver stars, half hid her curls
Of soft and shining gold. Her forehead, pale
With silent pain, a diamond circlet graced;
A ruby girdle garlanded her waist.

As her silk-vested damsels clasped around
Her swan-white neck and arms gems rich and fair,
Arranged the velvet folds that swept the ground,
And gave the last light touches to her hair,
A lordly step without resounded near,
And the shy damsels drew aback in fear.

Wide oped the door, across the threshold passed
The spouse so long unseen, so long unknown.
They stand together, face to face, at last,
The husband and the child to woman grown.
Her glance sank downward as his falcon eyes
Flashed lightning on her in their swift surprise.

The red blood mantled on his sunburnt cheek,
His heart beat fast beneath his doublet's fold,
As eagerly he viewed the maiden meek,
Standing with downcast eyes, and locks of gold.
"My fair wife, Bertha, thus I greet thee, sweet.
Behold, I sue for pardon at thy feet."

So spoke he as he came, with hasty tread,
Towards her, and then, sinking on his knee,
In gallant homage lowly bowed his head,
And kissed her taper fingers courteously.
Despite of gentle word and gesture bland,
She shrank and shivered as he touched her hand.

Across his bended brow a hot flush spread,
A rage of hunger fastened on his heart,
And ere again he raised his haughty head
A silent vow he registered apart —
"Thou shrinkest from me, dainty trembling dove?
In one short fortnight will I win thy love!"

Rising, he seated her, and standing near,
With soothing converse, every power pressed,
He sought to win her from the trembling fear

He saw beneath the throbbing of her breast,
Then, as noon clangored, led her to await
The Emperor's coming in her hall of state.

Rich showed the board, with napery fine,
And antique flagons chased with sculptures rare,
With golden beakers for the ruddy wine,
And silver statues holding in the air
Clusters of waxen tapers, in whose light
The carven crystal dishes glittered bright.

But not its wont the laughing chorus rang;
The walls re-echoed with no ribald jest;
No voice its wanton ballad boldly sang.
Hushed was the bearing of each sobered guest;
One scarce had known them in their altered port,
Those roist'ring gallants of a lawless court.

Before that spotless purity each wild
And sin-stained thought retired, struck with awe:
Like to the Holy Virgin, undefiled
By earthly taint, they deemed her, as they saw
Sitting beside the hoary Emperor's chair
That maiden countess, so supremely fair.

And as they gazed, the good, the loved, the lost,
Came thronging viewless through the haunted air.
One's vision by his sweet wife's face was crost;
One felt his mother's hand upon his hair;
The Emperor softly said, "O dame, the while
I look on thee, I see my dead child smile."

Count Egbert felt a new, bewild'ring pain,
His conscience shuddered with strange sense of sin.
How could he hope that loveliness to gain
To love him, that fair purity to win!
Sudden he thought he heard a voice divine
Saying unto him, "She is God's — not thine!"

III.

Solemn and still the stately minster rose,
A dream of beauty soaring in the air,
Fair and unearthly in its calm repose,
As seraph hands alone had placed it there
As only angel feet its aisles had trod
While heavenly voices chanted praise to God.

Oft to the window would the maiden come,
To gaze upon that marvel in the skies,
From her Lord's palace, now her constant home,
A look of grateful wonder in her eyes.
As if the adoration in her heart
Had in that beauty its rejoicing part.

In all that could delight or charm the eyes
The Count his lovely idol had enshrined,
Her chambers were adorned with tapestries
Where wondrous skill each glowing tint combined;
Venetian mirrors, ebon framed and gold,
And ivory caskets rich with wealth untold

Of radiant gems, and strings of lucent pearls,
And vermeil coffers filled with raiment rare
In the East broidered by Circassian girls,
Such as a queen might well be fain to wear,
And costliest veils, and orient perfumes
And breath of flowers filled the gilded rooms.

But most she loved the oratory, where
The sculptor's hand its utmost skill had shown:
The carven foliage richly clustered there

Like garlands, freshly gathered, turned to stone,
And saints and holy maids devoutly stood
In earnest prayer, with breathless life endued:

From the high mullioned window fell a rain
Of gorgeous hues within that silent place,
Rubies and sapphires, emeralds did engrain
The marble pavement, and the foliage grace
With splendid tints and glories opaline
Lambent with beauty in their flaming sheen.

Here daily came the maiden wife and knelt
Long hours absorbed in consecrated prayer
Or rapt in heavenly converse high, nor felt
The wistful watching of her husband, where
He gazed upon her from a practised cleft
That in the wall the architect had left.

Here did Count Egbert feed his aching heart
With love's despairing tortures, fierce and keen;
Here learned to know the bitter, burning smart
Of vainly dreaming all that might have been;
Here saw his heaven open to his eyes
And felt himself outcast from Paradise.

He dared not urge a lover's suit, nor press
For aught his yearning breast so longed to claim.
Had not a voice declared that saintliness
Not his but God's? his wife alone in name!
How could he ask for love's caress from her
Who seemed an angel come to minister?

And so the lovely lady dwelt apart,
Like cloistered nun, within that sumptuous pile.
She rarely saw her Lord, nor deemed his heart
Was breaking for one look of love, the while
The rich stream of her bounty she did pour
Upon the poor and hungry at his door.

Or sitting 'mid her listening damsels, read
The story of some saint whose noble life
In holy works of charity had sped,
Or dauntless had encountered scorn and strife
Of hostile men or beasts less fierce than they,
Or in the desert lived alone to pray.

Or, while he hidden listened, she would take
Her mandolin, and such soft harmonies
Her sweetly mingled voice and touch would make

That tears would steal into Count Egbert's eyes.
And his strong heart would quiver in its pain
Like laboring vessel, struck by storm amain.

'Twas Easter Eve; amid the deepening gloom
The minster bell slow pealed the solemn call
To mourn the Saviour dead within his tomb,
Slain as a ransom for the sins of all.
Towards the minster robed in raiment gray,
With close veiled head, the maiden took her way.

And all unseen in shrouded mantle dark,
With unplumed head upon his bosom bent,
Count Egbert followed, craving that slight spark
Of happiness, the bitter-sweet content,
To catch the golden waving of her hair,
To kneel beside her as she knelt in prayer.

Within, the cloistered columns faintly gleamed,
Their shadowy heights in darkness lost support
The roof whose distant lamps all starry beamed;
The holy air with incense dim was fraught,
While the deep pulses of the organ thrilled,
And the great fane with mighty surges filled.

And still unseen Count Egbert followed on
His fair wife's footsteps, till at last they stayed
Before an image of God's dying Son,
And there the Lady kneeled her down and prayed ;
And close beside, yet hidden from her sight,
'Mid the hushed crowd dark knelt the shrouded Knight.

When from the solemn darkness solemn came
A voice resounding o'er his bended head,
A preacher's voice outbreathed the quickening flame
Of love to God and man. In warning dread
He preached repentance, ere the fearful doom
Of sin should seize them in their living tomb,

Imprisoned in their crimes. "Oh, ye that hear,
Turn and repent!" he cried. "To death was born
The Saviour from your sins. Oh come, draw near
Unto his mighty heart. For bitter scorn
And cruel woe he left God's Heaven above,
That he might save you with his holy love.

"For you he toiled, for you he prayed and wept;
For you his head to insult vile did bow ;
For you his vigil of sore anguish kept,

When the blood sweated from his sacred brow;
For you he died upon his gory cross:
Ah, sinful men, shall your guilt be his loss?

"Oh, turn ye and repent! Behold him bleed!
God's only Son, the Saviour crucified.
He looks upon you in his dying need,
Still will you plunge the spear within his side!
Still shall your sinful hands the thorny crown
Upon that dear head press remorseless down!

"Still will you slay your Lord! Oh, ye that hear,
Turn, turn ye and repent! Ev'n now the sword
Of God's avenging angel waves. This year
Of sin and death is ending. What reward
Awaits you! Lo, the Great Day draweth near,
I see above the Awful Judge appear!"

Count Egbert shuddered. Like a fiery dart
The preacher's voice pierced thro' his haughty pride.
A frenzy of repentance seized his heart;
His tortured conscience writhed and blindly cried
For expiation of his life-long sin,
Salvation from God's Judgment Doom to win.

"All that ye hold most precious ye shall leave;
Unto the prisoners and poor shall go;
Shall tend the sick and wounded, and receive
Pardon for all your sins, for all your woe!"
As o'er his head the urgent voice did roll,
Count Egbert vowed a vow within his soul.

Like one who dreams, he saw his wife arise;
He followed her to his ancestral home,
He saw her light form melt before his eyes
In the dark portal whence they late had come;
And then Count Egbert turned him from the door
Of his great palace, and was seen no more.

IV.

The bright sun wooed the earth, the earth looked up
With timid gladness to his *radiant* face.
His thirsting lips drank deep of the cool cup
Of her clear fonts; then 'gan he to enlace
Her dainty breast with the fair flowering pride
Of spring-time blossoms, as befits a bride.

He filled the air with perfume faint and sweet,
Graced the blue sky with cloudlets soft and white,
And taught the woodland choristers songs meet
For angels' ears, so wondrous in delight.
They sang God's mystery of Life and Love,
Bright smiled the earth beneath, the heaven above.

The minster glittered like a shape of light,
O'er the broad palace did the sunbeams play.
An agèd friar, shading his old sight
From the bright, bright *glory*, thither took his way.
For audience instant from the Lady there,
The agèd friar humbly made his prayer.

And to the Lady's chamber he was brought,
Amid the splendors lavish scattered, where,
Seated among her damsels deft, she wrought
With them an altar cloth with broideries fair.
As he approached she reverent rose and said
Kind words of welcome, while the friar read

With earnest look her face, as if he sought
For guidance in some urgent task: there broke
From his sad heart a groan, as if his thought

Pained him to utter; then the old man spoke:
"Lady, Count Egbert prays, by Jesus' grace,
Before he dies, to look upon thy face!"

The room grew dark before the maiden's eyes,
A rushing as of waves smote on her ear,
A faint and shrinking horror did surprise
Her every sense, as Death himself drew near
Unto her youthful life. She bowed her head
In awe-struck prayer and followed where he led.

Within the hospice of a convent lay
Count Egbert, on a lowly pallet bed.
His sunken eyes were closed against the day,
As if no more to wake, while at his head
And feet death candles shed their pallid beam,
Telling the story of life's passing dream.

Beside the pallet stood a friar gray,
With lips compressed and serious brow downcast.
As the dame entered, slow he turned to say:
"Too late thou comest, Lady; all is past.
With his last breath, upon this dying bed,
He prayed for Heaven's blessing on thy head.

"He bade me tell thee how he sought to lave
The scorching stain of sin from off his life;
How he had toiled his guilty soul to save,
By bitter penance and by anguished strife,
With all his love for thee: how he did strain
In fevered cities, and on plague-struck plain,

"In ghastly prisons and in poisoned air
Of lazar-house, in hunger and in thirst,
By day and night, the cross of Christ to bear;
And how at last, even to him, accurst,
The peace of God had come. He died in grace.
Oh, Lady, 'mid the saved he has his place."

With fast-clasped hands and heavy, swimming eyes,
The maiden, breathless, hung on every word.
She felt a passion of soft pity rise,
Mixed with the gladness that her bosom stirred;
O'er her Lord bowed, in mingled joy and grief,
That new compassion sought in tears relief.

A shiver trembled through the stirless form,
The still lips pouted with returning breath,
The closed lids quivered, as those tear-drops warm

Called back her husband from the clasp of death,
Melting the frozen ice within his brain
With the sweet benediction of their rain.

But when those dark eyes opened, in their gaze
Was seen a strange bewilderment; his thought,
Wandering restless in a dreamy maze,
Was all unconscious of itself, and wrought
Pictures of far-off scenes, nor did he know
Aught of the present in its living show.

Long did he hover on the confine drear
Of that dim realm from which he scarce returned;
Long did they watch, with changing hope and fear,
Beside his pallet while the fever burned,
Till on his weariness sleep fell at last,
Peaceful and calm, all danger overpast.

Through those slow, fateful days the maiden kept
Her constant watch beside her husband's bed,
Singing low, soothing ditties till he slept
In broken snatches, pillowing his head,
Distraught with pain, upon her pitying breast,
His scorching hand in her cool fingers prest.

And as she watched and tended him, her heart
Stirred softly in her bosom, as a bird
That, nestling, wakes ; her thoughts, that dwelt apart,
In tender circles drew towards him : she heard
Faint whispers in the silence of her soul,
Through all her being love's sweet music stole.

Now, as he slept, she bent his couch beside,
A look of trembling joy upon her face.
The golden sunbeams o'er her head did glide,
Shedding a glory round its angel grace.
Count Egbert woke, he saw, he raised his eyes,
And said : "Oh, God, I wake in Paradise!

"Oh, holy God, I thank thee, thou hast brought
My soul into the Heav'n I vainly dreamed
When yet on earth. Thy perfect will is wrought!"
A raptured smile o'er his pale features beamed.
"When shall at last I hear a heavenly voice,
Saying unto me : 'She is God's and thine'?"

The maiden's spirit, as her husband spoke,
Dissolved in fervent love. A heavenly flame
Breathed thro' her heart, her smile resplendent broke,

And from her lips the words inspirèd came,
Cheering his soul like consecrated wine,
While round his neck her gentle arms entwine,
"Egbert, dear husband, I am God's and thine."

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